



# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees*

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686  
Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. The Employee Advisory Service is well promoted here. I have wondered whether such visibility for the program is a good thing. Doesn't this say to our customers that there are a lot of personal problems in our organization?

■ Q. Although EAS is voluntary, regardless of whether an employee is self-referred or referred by the supervisor, I often emphasize to employees that my referral of them is "mandatory." It helps me feel more certain that they will go. Is this okay?

■ Q. If I refer an employee to EAS for behavior and performance problems, how should I respond if asked, "Do you think I have personal problems?" And what if I really do think he or she has personal problems? And what if they are obvious?

A. When Employee Assistance Programs began their rapid growth in popularity during the 1970s, some business executives worried about whether EAPs would make it appear as though a company were openly admitting it had troubled employees. There was fear that this would look bad. Indeed, the idea of talking openly about troubled employees in one's organization was new. But troubled employees have always been around. The financial benefits and positive impact on the workforce because of having an EAP overcame these fears, and the EAP movement blossomed. Large and small companies and government agencies now use EAPs. No evidence ever emerged to show that talking about troubled employees was bad for business. In fact, having an EAP became a way for an organization to show that it cared about its employees and viewed them as a valuable resource.

A. Telling your employee that a referral is mandatory when EAS is voluntary is inconsistent with the state policy. It's not what management had in mind when the program was established. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines mandatory as "containing or constituting a command; obligatory." This definition is not consistent with EAS ethics and accepted EAP practice. Some supervisors use the term "mandatory" as a substitute for "supervisor referral" in common expression. This also diminishes the positive perception of EAS. EAPs are more effective when they attract employees. Attempting to make a supervisor referral mandatory confuses employees about the nature and purpose of the EAP. EAS suddenly appears punitive or aligned with management. Let your employee know that when you notify EAS of a referral, you will only be told of their attendance. Support your employees, insist on accountability, and encourage employees to view a referral as an offer of assistance. Most employees will seek help without the need to coerce them.

A. Remind your employee that it is not your role to determine the existence of personal problems. Add that, no matter how obvious a personal problem might appear, the referral to EAS is still based upon performance problems that you have documented (quality of work, conduct/behavior, attendance, and availability issues). Further discussion with your employee about personal problems is risky. It often leads to unwitting approval by the supervisor of the employee's decision to select another source of help or solution to the personal problem. Remind your employee that EAS exists as a helping resource, but it is his or her choice to accept or decline the referral. To help motivate employees who might naturally avoid seeking help for a personal problem associated with denial, be sure to discuss the likely outcome of continued unsatisfactory performance. Your EAS professional can help with the referral. Call and talk about it.

■ Q. We referred an employee to EAS rather than dismissing her for repeated attendance problems. She went, but I expected more feedback from EAS who, simply reported that she had an appointment. We think she once again seems to have avoided the consequences. How should we react?

A. Your goal in making a supervisor referral to EAS was to eliminate or reduce your employee's attendance problem, not to get her into some kind of treatment. You made wise use of EAS and have made progress because you can now anticipate and expect improved attendance. Though EAS made no specific recommendations to you, your employee is the one responsible for the changes you expect. If her attendance does not improve, you could then consider an administrative response that you believe is appropriate, coordinated with your Human Resource Consultant. Until now, you may have experienced significant frustration in fruitlessly warning your employee. The present intervention is not simply a repeat experience. It is a turning point with the promise of certain change that is within your control.

■ Q. My employee was absent without leave for three days. When he finally returned to work, he said EAS told him to take off to deal with "stress issues." How should I react to this report?

A. Under the circumstances, you should expect your employee to be responsible for following established work rules when requesting or reporting his use of leave. EAS does not interfere with administrative procedures by attempting to excuse your employee from work in the process of assisting the employee. Conceivably, a health care provider might make such a recommendation, but the employee would be responsible for arranging any leave. It is possible that a discussion occurred between your employee and the EAS professional about a need to take off work. It is also possible that your employee has been absent without leave and hopes referencing his involvement with EAS will help him avoid responsibility for this absence. You should expect a more satisfactory answer to your question if one is needed to support giving him the leave.

---

**NOTES:**

Visit EAS on our website at:  
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

